

Learner types

The Age of Learners

The age of the students is a major factor in teachers' decisions about how and what to teach. Learners of different ages have different needs, competences and cognitive skills. Some people say that children learn languages faster than adults do. Children are thought to pick up new languages effortlessly. Another belief is that adolescents are unmotivated. Adult learners can engage with abstract thought.

In the following table the basic differences among three age groups are presented.

CHILDREN	ADOLESCENTS	ADULTS
Topics: their surroundings, animals, toys, nature, tales	Topics: love, pop music, sport, cars, living world, films	Topics: marriage, career, politics, travelling, housing
Concentration span: short; a lot of varied activities are to be planned for a lesson, they are good at pronunciation	Concentration span: longer, inhibited, shy, vulnerable, they dislike being mad to look foolish in front of their classmates	Concentration span: the longest, better cognitive skills, good at morphology and at syntax
Teaching structures: Covert way, discovery technique	Teaching structures: Both techniques are used	Teaching structures: Overt way, teacher-led presentation
Motivation: Intrinsic, the process of learning is more important, than the result	Motivation: both intrinsic and extrinsic types of motivation	Motivation: Mainly extrinsic, short cut intensive courses
Way of thinking: concrete, learning by doing principle	Way of thinking: less concrete, more abstract.	Way of thinking: abstract, highly developed cognitive skills, stressful atmosphere, they want to achieve advanced level in a short time.
No educational histories are fixed.	They have their histories: each failure predisposes them to more failure, each success provokes them the for more success	A long history of learning experience: with their own, record of successor failure.

Young learners (6-12 years)

1. Children learn by doing – Concepts and language develop through engagement and involvement in doing things. Children's way of thinking is concrete so we must not teach concepts to them but we have to develop manual skills through certain activities giving English instructions.
2. Children need to make sense of the world– They can “grasp” meaning even if they do not fully understand language. Teachers are supposed to use English without explaining the grammatical rules.
3. The process of learning is as important as the product– The activities in English classes must be attractive and enjoyable to the learners. Young learners cannot understand the point of learning a foreign language; they are interested in the games and activities in the lessons.
4. There's nothing like success to succeed– Success will generate more success they will motivate learners intrinsically.
5. Covert way of grammar teaching should be applied– Grammatical structures are presented and practiced in nursery rhymes, songs and tongue twisters.
(Sárosdy-Gaál 1994: 11-14)

Adolescents (13-18 years)

1. Search for individual identity– Peer approval may be more important for the student than the attention of the teacher.
2. Adolescents may cause discipline problems– If the teacher manages to control them in a supportive and constructive way, they can be solved.
3. Each failure predisposes them to more failure, each success provokes them for more success– Adolescents are very sensitive they can get more and more inhibited if they are hurt I their feelings.
4. Both intrinsic and extrinsic types of motivation work with them– They enjoy age- relevant challenges but they are interested in extra scores for an entrance exam as well.
5. Both covert and overt ways of grammar teaching can be applied– As this period is a transitory part in their lives, both ways can be useful. (Harmer 2003: 38-40)

Adults (18 –)

1. They can engage with abstract thought– They like learning about the language and they are interested in the reasons for certain linguistic phenomena.
2. They have a whole range of life experiences to draw on (e.g., negative experience with learning Russian– Adults are not really confident because they have had a lot of failures while learning foreign languages so teachers should find new ways of motivation for them.
3. They have expectations about the learning process so they are not open to new ways and methods.
4. Adults are more disciplined than some teenagers; they are prepared to struggle on despite boredom.
5. They are extrinsically motivated as they have clear understanding of why they are learning and what they want to get out of it.
6. Overt way of grammar teaching can be applied as their cognitive skills are highly developed. On the other hand pronunciation is a weak point of adult learners as their organic basis of speech is not flexible at this age. (Harmer 2003: 40)

Learner differences

1. Neuro-linguistic programming – Revell and Norman (1997)

Some people are better at some things than others –better at analyzing or at remembering faces than others. This fact would indicate that there are differences in the ways individual brains work. It also suggests that people respond differently to the same stimuli. There are two well-known theories which teachers have attempted to use for the benefit of their learners. One of them is Neuro-linguistic programming. According to this we use a number of “primary representational systems” to experience the world. These systems are described in the acronym “VAKOG” which stands for:

a/ Visual (we look and see) – visual learners tend to prefer reading and studying charts, drawings and graphic information;

b/ Auditory (we hear and listen) – these learners are characterized by a preference for listening to lectures and audiotapes;

c/ Kinesthetic (we feel externally, internally or through movement) – these learners are right-brain dominant, they use both hemispheres of their brains simultaneously that is why they are acquiring the structures through actions;

d/ Olfactory (we smell things),

e/ Gustatory (we taste things) – in case of the latter two nose and mouth are involved in the presentation of certain topics, it must be added that they have not been explored in language teaching so far. (Harmer 2003: 41)

2. Multiple intelligences theory – Gardner (1983)

The other one is Multiple intelligences theory which is a concept introduced by Howard Gardner. In his book *Frames of Mind* he suggested that as humans we do not possess a single intelligence, but a range of intelligences (Gardner: 1983). He listed seven of these:

a/ Musical/Rhythmic– learners like singing, listening to music; they are good at remembering melodies, picking up sounds; they can learn language best by music, rhythm and melody;

b/ Verbal/Linguistic– (left-brain dominant) learners like reading, writing and telling stories; they are good at memorizing names, places, dates; they learn best by saying, hearing and seeing words;

c/ Visual/Spatial– learners are the same as visual learners in the previous system, they like drawing, looking at pictures, movies and drawings; they are good at imagining things, reading maps, charts; they learn best by dreaming, visualizing, working with colours and pictures;

d/ Bodily kinesthetic– learners like moving around, touching and talking, using body language; they are good at physical activities such as dancing, sport and acting; they learn best by processing knowledge through bodily sensations, touching, moving, interacting with space;

e/ Logical/Mathematical– learners like doing experiments, figuring things out, working with numbers exploring patterns and relationships; they are good at math, reasoning and problem solving; they learn best by categorizing, classifying, working with abstract patterns;

f/ Intra personal (introverted)– learners are the loners, they like learning alone, pursuing their own interests; they are good at understanding selves, focusing inward on feelings, goals, being original; they learn best by working alone individualized projects, self-paced instructions having their own spaces;

g/ Interpersonal (extroverted)– learners (the socializes) like having lots of friends, talking to people, joining groups; they are good at understanding people, leading others, organizing, communicating, manipulating and mediating conflicts; they learn best by sharing, comparing, relating, cooperating, interviewing.

3. Learning styles according to Willing (1987)

Keith Willing, working with adult students in Australia, produced the following descriptions:

a/ Conversers: these are students who are by nature solitary, prefer to avoid groups, and who are independent and confident in their own abilities. Most importantly they are analytic and can impose their own structures on learning. They tend to be cool and pragmatic.

b/ Conformists: these are students who prefer to emphasize learning 'about language' over Learning to use it. They tend to be dependent on those in

authority and are perfectly happy to work in non-communicative classrooms, doing what they are told. A classroom of conformists is one which prefers to see well-organized teachers.

c/ Concrete learners: though they are like conformists, they also enjoy the social aspects of learning and like to learn from direct experience. They are interested in language use and language as communication rather than language as a system. They enjoy games and group work in class.

d/ Communicative learners: these are Language use orientated. They are comfortable out of class and show a degree of confidence and a willingness to take risks which their colleagues may lack. They are much more interested in social interaction with other speakers of the language than they are with analysis of how the language works. They are perfectly happy to operate without the guidance of a teacher.